

# The Third Mission

## CHAPTER X

### AN OREGON CRIME

Save for the yelping and baying of dogs in the settlement, and the wailing of distant coyotes, the great brown desert to the north of Vulture Point was silent. The last threshing crew had retired from their work beneath the semi-tropical sun, and the twinkling lights in the ranch windows denoted that they were enjoying a well-earned repast.

With the full blaze of the summer moon upon them, all the objects in the desert stood out with greater prominence than daylight itself could give. Barns half full of wheat, corrals crowded with sleeping hogs, orchards full of heavily laden fruit-trees stood out clear to the eye. One could count the black forms of the animals, or the rich clusters of yellow peaches.

Far away to the south, Snowy Bute rose against the sky, its proud crest lifted high above the other mountains that hemmed in the valley of the Rogue River. Like huge sentinels crouching in grotesque attitudes, they sheltered the desert from the northeast wind, casting their shadows on the cooling plain.

No rain has fallen for several months, and the creeks gape with dry, parching throats, as if seeking pity from the beautiful, unrelenting moon. All is still—so still that it might be midnight instead of eight o'clock. The summer evenings in Oregon are very short; the sun sinks to its western bed almost before the afternoon is fully spent, leaving the skies as it found them, blue with the blue that wearies.

To the north of the desert, facing a winding track that branches off from the chief highway a short distance from the settlement, stands a little wooden house and a few hundred acres of fenced-in ground. At the back of it is a gently sloping hill, covered with a dense forest of pine-trees, some of which adjoin the orchard. This latter consists of about a hundred and twenty trees laden with peaches, plums, and apples, some of which now litter the hard-caked soil. Leaving the orchard and going toward the back entrance of the house, one passes in succession plots of wheat and of Indian corn. To the right lie the barns and corral; to the left, a well for the use of the ranchmen. Beside the well is a pile of loose logs ready for the stove. The space around is bare, affording no shelter for creeping animals.

Something, however, is moving, silently wriggling, with head stretched forward and eyes on the alert, over the soil that, upon close examination, is seen to be swarming with black beetles. This creature, short, thick, and hideously striped with broad yellow bands, is the much dreaded rattle-snake—an eerie, evil thing to be abroad on a beautiful summer night. When close to the brink of the well, it halts, cringes in an attitude of rapt attention, listening to a faint scratching sound—the noise of some animal trying to force its way out of a prison. The snake curls its back in doubt whether to advance or retreat, but its trepidation is only momentary. Rendered reckless, perhaps, by the memory of some domestic grievance—for who knows if snakes, like men, love and suffer—it suddenly moves forward, heedless of consequences.

Crash! one of the logs on the summit of the pile moves, totters, and falls; from the place where it has lain, a grey head with snarling teeth peeps out, cautiously scanning the horizon. Following the head is a long thin body, that lies for a few seconds in its new position. Then, seeing nothing of an antagonistic nature—for, in spite of its cautious circumspection, it has not perceived the

poisonous reptile—it drops to the ground and approaches the well. Then, but not till then, does the creature become aware of the ringed form approaching it.

For a moment the two creatures glare at each other in curious expectation. To the stoat there is an expression in the snake's eye which seems unnatural; hitherto it has regarded the serpent as distinctly peaceable; why, then, should this one glare with such intense malignity? Why does it spit out its forked tongue and hiss? Because—and a shiver passes through the poor stoat—it is mad—mad with the summer heat. By degrees it becomes animated, its eyes more and more baneful—its tail rings out a rapid warning—and it makes a rush for the now petrified stoat.

The latter stands as if fascinated, and remains so until its foe—for there can no longer be any doubt as to the snake's intentions—has approached within a few inches. The spell is then broken, and, regaining the use of its limbs, it retreats towards the wall. The snake makes ready for the fatal attack, draws back its head, and with a muscular movement of its striped neck, suddenly lunges forward. With a spasmodic motion the stoat springs aside, avoiding the vicious thrust; but in so doing it stumbles over the brink of the well and falls with a loud splash into the water. The walls being high and slippery, afford no means of escape; and, after a brave struggle for life, the animal sinks beneath the dark surface, whilst its foe, scared by its unaccountable disappearance, seeks shelter beneath the wood pile.

I, Agonostes, waited to witness the end of the fight, and then turned toward the house with noiseless feet, and stepping on to the low platform, I entered the kitchen.

There were but four rooms in the dwelling, two on the ground floor, and two immediately above. The kitchen, in which I found myself, was a small apartment, with a stove in the middle, and a few plain pieces of furniture set around the walls. Under the window was a deal table upon which the evening meal was laid. It was not a sumptuous repast—home-made bread, syrup instead of butter, bacon and fried eggs. On the other side of the room was a large chest which served a double purpose; the top was used as a rolling board, while the drawers contained groceries. Beside this stood a wooden bench, bearing a bucket of water and two or three dippers. This constituted the furniture of the kitchen.

The room next to it, styled the guest's chamber, was in reality a kind of lumber closet, all sorts of odds and ends littering the floor. Overhead were the bedrooms, separated from each other by a small partition destitute of a door, and so thin as to afford no privacy. To attempt to sleep in such rooms, amid such filth as there prevailed, would have been waste of time. One glance at the hordes of "yellow jackets," and other more obnoxious insects, was enough to impress this upon the mind of any reasonable man.

Outside, in the veranda, wrapped up in a blanket, is the place to sleep—there, though not wholly free from insect visitors, dreams will come at last, to cheat the sleeper with visions of his life in the old country.

Voices from the direction of the well attracted my attention. I looked; the occupants of the house were crossing the yard. The tall man in the centre, with the slouch hat carelessly thrust on the back of his head, was, I knew, my client—Edward Holt. He on the right, with a weaker, less marked physiognomy, was Ernest Rickman, his ranch "chum," and the long, lanky-bearded giant on the left was Bill Brooke, a Californian outlaw. From a moral point of view none of the trio were prepossessing; a minister might have passed several times before making up his mind to address them. This, of course, was to my satisfaction; and I had little doubt of the success of my present campaign.

"Come on, boys, let's get our grub!" Holt exclaimed, throwing a sack of corn, which he had been carrying on his shoulders, down upon the platform.

"I guess you ain't far wrong, Ed," the Californian replied gruffly, from the tin basin in which his shock head had just been cooling. "I put in a spell of tough work this afternoon, and feel that I could do with a bite."

Rickman spoke next. "The eggs will be cold; get a move on you, Bill," he said impatiently, drawing in his chair.

With a good many splutterings and oaths, the Californian completed his ablutions, and, after emptying the basin into the yard, sat down to the meal. His ferrety eyes soon perceived that Holt had not been so fastidious. There is one thing ranchmen usually avoid—sitting down to food with dirty hands. Their bodies may be unacquainted with water, their language and habits equally foul, but their hands, rough and misshapen as they are, must be washed before eating. Offenders against this social rule have a rough time of it in Oregon.

Bill grew serious. "Do you know what the boys at the Point say, Ed?" he remarked.

"No, and darn me if I care."

It was a contemptuous reply, shot out between mouthfuls of egg.

"Wall, I reckon it won't harm you to hear. Anyway you've got to do so. They sez, Holt, sez they, is the muckiest man we've ever struck. He makes bread with dirty hands."

"I've something to say to you two," was the only reply vouchsafed by bit.

"Spit it out, boss."

Bill was apprehensive, and chewed his quid of tobacco uneasily. Holt's "somethings" were often of a dangerous nature.

Rickman, the quicker of the two, had jumped to conclusions.

"It's about young Goodman, ain't it?" Bill's eyebrows were in elevation—he smelt poison. Holt, in the quiet manner of one accustomed to take the lead in risky enterprises, with that steady self-possession to be met with in born gamblers, thrust his hands into his hip pockets and faced the others.

"You're on the track, Ern," he said. "It's that precious young tenderfoot who, by the bye, ought to be here by now."

"The *'Frisco Examiner* has been blowing mighty hard over those railway strikes," Bill put in. "Do you reckon the kid's got skeered and trotted home?" I had been standing by the door during their meal, but at the beginning of this colloquy I left that position and posted myself behind the chair of my client, with one hand on his shoulder and the other on his moist forehead, pressing it almost caressingly. This formed a link between us, so that the evil persuasions of my soul might without hindrance enter his contaminated mind.

"I hope not, boys," he was saying, "for you see, a lot depends on his coming. If the sum his mother named is landed at the bank, there's not much fear about our share of it—even supposing—and he is such a d—d tenderfoot that the notion's ridiculous—he takes it into his head to doubt us and ask questions at the Point, what will he hear? Nothing against *us*!"

Rickman, who was lost in thought, asked suddenly—

"Is Josh Brown square?"

"Josh?" said Holt. "Safe as the old mare in the corral. I've sounded him on that score. He isn't such a son of a gun as to give us away to any greenhorn."

The speaker's lips curled at the bare idea of such innocence in the local storekeeper. Ole Man Brown, as folks called him, was a notability—a hard-headed business man who had managed to pile up money in a district where others lost it, and at a time when others felt its absence.

If any stranger wanted to buy land round the Point, he went to old Brown; if he wished to enquire into the antecedents of any member of the community, he went to old Brown. Not always to elicit truth perhaps, but to get his fill of facts—quite possible facts and plenty of them!

From this it may be gathered that Brown was a well-known character; and Brown's daughters were certainly the elite of the place.

Every ambitious young farmer in the district had a hankering after them, and at one time or another had been seen, in his Sunday best, fixing his horse to the post on the stone platform; and every one had taken his refusal with an air of submission, for all knew Ole Man Brown and his love for his daughters.

So Josh was the first, perhaps the only man who needed "squaring"—the opinions of the rest counted for little.

"Well, if you've settled with Josh, that's everything."

Rickman was but half satisfied, however, and his voice showed it.

"You can sleep on that," said Holt complacently. "I've fixed him, and Jack Whitely too."

"The Bedford Banker?" said Bill, who was beginning to show some excitement.

"That's the boy—Jack is slick enough for all the Bedford hoodlums" (*Anglice*, scapegoats).

"You're right. With him on our side, we shall do well." Still Rickman was not at ease.

"Mrs Goodwin wrote to him on my recommendation," went on Holt, "asking a few pages of questions about us, our ranch, and our prospects. Also stating, that in the event of her son emigrating, she intended to lodge £500 with him. You bet, Jack gave her all the information she wanted!"

My client laughed, and the others followed suit; his mirth and his cynicism were alike infectious.

In the West, it is customary after supper to sit on the platform and enjoy the cool night air. I crouched among the men as they did so, observing them silently, and at my leisure.

Holt was the first to speak, drowning the faint barking of some distant dogs, and the click of hammers in some forge away across the desert.

"You are anxious to get back to the old country, Ern—and you, Bill, to the East?"

"Anxious is hardly the correct word," Rickman replied, from his recumbent position against the wall. If you had said infernally keen, you would have been nearer it."

"That's about it," chimed the Californian, "d—d keen. I'm thirsty for York city and the yellow-haired girls."

Holt laughed mechanically—this was no time for bantering woman-talk.

"Like me," he said, taking no notice of the last allusion, "you both want money; like me, you aren't particular how you get it. But, unlike me, you haven't tried and tried, and thought and thought over every way that seemed possible."

"Yes," they muttered wearily—they were tired of talking about this money which came no nearer for all their talking—"so long as we can leave this God-forsaken hole behind, we don't care how we raise the dollars. Put us in the way of getting them, and we'll soon show you."

"Well, boys," and Holt eyed them from his position in the shadow as they sat silhouetted in the moonlight, "you shall. There is nothing to prevent your moving from here," he sunk his voice to a whisper, "if, *if*"—"the repetition made his hearers shudder—"if you make up your minds."

Rickman stirred awkwardly—maybe he had had some dim notions himself.

"You speak in riddles," he said.

"Do I? I'll make myself clearer. None of us are over-scrupulous, eh, Bill?"

The Californian felt his veins creep. In the daytime, when the clear sun burned and blazed, he was as daring as the best of them; but at night, when the shadows fell grim and weird, and the moon shone cold, Bill was another creature. He peered at the boss, and the boss, with the advantage of position, stared back at him. Both his tone and look were full of deadly significance.

“N—no,” Bill replied, shivering. “I ain’t particular—darn me if I’m skeered o’ anything. Why, when I was down in Californy, once—”

“We’ve heard that gag before,” cut in the boss. “You may say you ain’t particular?”

“I sez so.”

“So do I,” chimed in Rickman.

It was ludicrous to observe how completely Holt’s stronger will dominated theirs. When he spoke, they listened, swearing with him, laughing with him, grumbling with him, entirely swayed by his words, to do as he bid them.

For several days they had noticed he had been gloomy and absent-minded—as they conjectured, turning over in his brain some plan for their emancipation. His voice went on:

“Once establish the fact of your willingness to get off by hook or crook—the rest must be satisfactory.

We will get it—we *will*—” he hissed out with snakish energy. The whole ranch vibrated with it, the huge outlined mountains took it up and flung it back again.

“We will get it!”

The coyotes baying among the pine-trees seemed to have caught the sound, and echoed it in sympathetic malignity. He paused to note with satisfaction the effect of his words; they had been playing on his tongue for weeks, waiting for the moment of liberty which had come at last.

The black, swarthy head of my client was intensified in the white light, the lean cadaverous face of Rickman, the huge ungainly form of the Californian, were weird enough company for any one to meet, and their thoughts were stranger still. No one spoke. Holt beat time on the woodwork with his feet. He had given himself away. With what result?

His usually emotionless nature was evidently agitated, the cool air passing over the plain from Snowy Bute fanned his face. The air, like the man, was impure. It brought with it the faintest tinge of something nauseous, something dead.

In hot countries the carcass of an animal becomes unbearable even in the short time that elapses before the birds of prey discover it. Rickman, glad of some excuse to turn from the momentous subject under discussion, said gruffly:

“Why didn’t you turn the hogs loose, Ed? That cow stinks.”

My client frowned—he disliked digressions.

“Because,” he said shortly, “the brute died of poison—I thought I told you about the rattler we found close to it. It must have lain down on the snake. Rattlers are just a bit tricky this hot weather. But what has that got to do with what we were talking about?”

The Californian grunted; he was in no mood to bind himself over to a plot incurring lynch law. He had seen something of that down South. His brain was slow and cautious for a Westerner; moreover, he was tired with his day’s work, and wanted rest for his limbs as well as time for his thoughts.

He drew in his legs as if they pained him.

“I reckon, boys,” he said, “I’ll turn in. We can talk about the kid when he comes, time enough then and plenty. So long!”

Holt neither spoke nor moved; he was too incensed to trust himself, so he contented himself with looking at Bill as he languidly rose and slouched off. There was little to glean from his expression—it was sullen and tired, with the heaviness that comes from long hours in the hot sun.

As he passed Rickman, the latter rose, and, bidding Holt good-night, followed Bill into the kitchen, closing the door after him. Holt strained his ears to the utmost, but could not hear their voices; and in a very few moments, their movements in the veranda overhead told him that they had retired for the night. The wind still blew over the plain with the same faint, pestilential taint. The embers in the kitchen stove burned up brightly, and then died out.

Still, in the distance the dogs barked, the coyotes howled, the moon mocked them with its changeless light—and still my client sat on the edge of the platform, beating with his foot against the boarding.

The spirit of aggression—my spirit—was upon him; he cursed his comrades, he cursed the beasts on the hills, he cursed the luck that had brought him thither. Nothing would have pleased him better than an outlet for his combative propensities—some object on which to vent his spleen.

As I looked at him, he became almost the incarnation of evil—the evil that belongs to master criminals. His head, as I have said, was massive, and the bumps of mischief on either side were remarkably developed. And, as is so often the case with criminal heads of the higher intellectual order, the perceptive and reasoning faculties were strongly marked, thereby strengthening the natural propensities.

When I came to look at the back of the skull there was a singular deficiency—it fell away suddenly just where the moral group is often found, and would have attracted any novice in phrenology. Speaking of the head leads me to criticise the features. His eyes, surmounted by black eyebrows, were brown, or rather dark yellow, cool, steady, and half closed, with something in their quiet depths to arouse suspicion, and put a prudent man upon his guard. They were the eyes of a murderer.

The usual immobility of his face had given way to a flush and a slight twitch of annoyance. He was not accustomed to having his plans frustrated; he had wished for the company of his companions to discuss an important matter, and they had refused it.

It had been through the agency of Rickman, who had sent an ingenious letter to a housemaster at his old school, that Goodwin had undertaken the journey. Without any other choice but the drudgery of an office, the boy, on leaving school, had communicated with the same master, hoping to hear of an opening abroad. Strange to relate, that very morning the latter had received Rickman's glowing letter, from which he quoted some portions

“For a small sum a share in our syndicate can be bought. This would give an additional interest to the purchaser, who would naturally be drawn closer to the life than if he were a hired hand. Still, I should be glad to have boys from you here in any capacity, if only out of affection for the old school.”

Goodwin was destined to remember the housemaster's concluding remark—“Rickman is a man to be trusted, warm-hearted and sincere. Go to him by all means, and you will be sure of a royal welcome.”

This closed the correspondence as far as the master was concerned. Goodwin had yet to write to Rickman. Several anxious weeks of waiting ensued, then came the reply.

It was principally composed of a description of the ranch, its products and prospects, and of the capital necessary for a share in the syndicate. Rickman played his role well. Careful not to make

the financial portion too important, he wrote as one cheery, genial public schoolboy would write to another. And he succeeded.

Mrs Goodwin remarked to her dearest friend:

“Our boy will not be going to strangers, but to an old schoolfellow, a dear, kind young man, who will be like an elder brother to him. It is such a comfort to know of some one so thoroughly to be trusted.”

So, on recommendation of the syndicate, Mrs Goodwin entered into correspondence with a banker in Bedford city, the nearest town to Vulture Point, and arranged to transmit to him boo, as soon as her son had settled down to ranch life.

All preliminaries being thus concluded to the satisfaction of both parties, Goodwin, furnished with an elaborate outfit, left England when the summer was still young, and the trees covered with fresh leaves. Full of eager anticipations, his boyish hopes shrouding the future in a halo of romance, he travelled westward, thrilling with glad young wonder at the new sights he saw.

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Holt had not moved much except to shift his hands to his knees.

“I want the money more than the others do,” his thoughts ran, “and I generally get what I want out here. As far as I can see, there are two courses open to me—either to abscond with the money if he is unwilling to part with it, and leave the others to shift for themselves; or to let the others do away with the youngster and go shares in the £500. The former is more dangerous—but bah, why should I care—there is only one life after all.”

Here I intervened: “And of course, no hereafter.”

“True,” he went on, “there is no evidence of a God or of punishment—none. All that is an idle superstition of the ancients. Life ends with death, and death can only last a moment. I’ll risk it. I have nothing to lose, much to gain. Nature gave me plenty of wits, and, by Jove, I’ll use them.”

The rafters overhead creaked.

“Hullo!” cried Holt suspiciously, “aren’t you fellows asleep? You’ve been there long enough.”

Californian Bill replied with a prolonged snore, indicating his inability to converse.

It was now late, and mindful of a heavy day’s work to come, Holt rose and slowly moved away. Weary with toil and scheming he was soon asleep, and I alone in the ranch was still watching.

Preferring to keep my vigil on the platform, I gazed reflectively at the long row of mountains, pencilled darkly in the moonlit background. Somehow Snowy Bute riveted my attention, and I found myself expecting something strange to appear on its summit.

“How like that grey rock is to a human figure,” I thought. “It moves! It is a figure! It is leaping through space and coming towards me.”

I stood amazed. What form, or spirit, was this? Then it drew nearer, and the halo of light accompanying it showed me that it was an angel of heaven. I recognised that the dimly-seen saintly features and mournful eyes must be those of Sagatheela. In another moment she was by my side, regarding me with her accustomed melancholy. She spoke, but tears almost choked her voice—“Once more we meet, O Agonostes—and alas that I find thee thus occupied. Lovest thou Diaphernes still as ever?”

These words only added fuel to the kindling flame; I faced her impatiently, fascinated by the countenance I so bitterly hated.

“Ay,” I cried in my fierceness, “I love him more than ever. And should I not? Has he not done more for me than thy God will ever do?”

She paused for a moment, then laid her hand upon my shoulder. A sensation like that which I had experienced on a previous occasion pervaded my limbs. I looked upon her with diminishing abhorrence, that might almost have changed to liking. Had she continued silently looking at me with those holy eyes, and touching me with that gentle hand, she might have gained a victory. But she spoke. The light of love in her eyes impressed me differently from the tone of her voice. The latter was too womanish! With an impatient shrug of my shoulder that loosened her hold, I confronted her in sullen stubbornness. Never was a woman more fully convinced of her failure to force love from the unwilling—she stood silent, and her silence spoke of the intensity of her shame.

She threw one imploring look at me that lingered long in my mind. Then, almost unintentionally, I cried to Diaphernes for strength to keep loyal to him. And there was sent upon me a fit of savage, irresistible fury.

Forgetting her immortality, I leaped at her with murderous intent, and a barbarous yell upon my lips. Then as I plunged forward and clutched the air, a cry which might have been that of a soul with its love refused broke upon my ears, and rang around me. A light, white and blinding, flashed in a succession of quick flashes from the summit of Snowy Bute, and ere it ceased Sagatheela had vanished. But on the eastern horizon I read, written in crimson letters across the fathomless blue: “THINK NOT TO TERRIFY GOD’S OWN ELECT WITH EMPTY BLOWS.”

Then a mighty wind swept across the barren plain, and in it, riding on a coal-black horse, I saw the figure of an angel in shining armour, whose open vizor revealed the face of her whom I had striven to repulse. Through fence and barrier the swift steed bore her on, and, as she dashed past me, I heard her say:

“Next time thou seest me, thou shalt implore my forgiveness.”

Then an earthquake seemed to heave up the bosom of the earth; the mountains reared their heads, the solemn pines waved to and fro, the desert spat forth flames, and I hid my face in fear.

## CHAPTER XI

### THE TENDERFOOT

Life on a ranch out West seldom varies from the same dull routine. Thompson’s County, Oregon, was no exception. In summer work begins at five, before the hot sun has risen, and the air is still cold. Breakfast at six, then off to the orchard, corral, or cornfield—work, work, work, with the scorching sun overhead, the hard baked soil under foot, swearing, blaspheming, boasting of drunken and immoral revelries, tales of women and of Chinese ’Frisco—stories of a hundred and one fictitious escapades. Back to a hasty dinner at eleven, and off again. Such is the life that men lead out West with land to sell—but it is shrouded with glamour when they speak to their younger brethren in the old country. “Plenty of work, plenty of honestly earned rest.”

To Neville Goodwin the change, after a life of English comfort, was very cruel—and although he was at first too much attracted by the novelty of his surroundings to give way to grief, he soon learned to bemoan the difference, and suffered all the miseries of home-sickness.

Of the treatment he received from his companions he had no complaint to make. They had been kind and considerate, had allowed him a day or two’s rest, and given him the lightest tasks. Seeing that he had not the physique to stand the strain of work in cornfield and orchard, he had

been appointed cook, which, with their limited menu, involved no great labour. Tea, bacon, or mush for breakfast; tea, bacon, potatoes, sometimes hard beef, more rarely beans and damper, for dinner; tea, bacon and eggs for supper. Milk was a luxury, to be seen but seldom, and whisky never appeared at meals.

Limited as the menu was, there was one dish which caused Goodwin some anxiety to prepare. That dish was mush. The art of making porridge sinks into insignificance compared with the Oregon recipe for mush.

A handful of smooth oatmeal is poured into a frying pan already swimming in liquid bacon fat; this compound is stirred till it becomes an uninviting yellow paste, painfully suggestive of train oil; with it is mixed a cupful, sometimes of milk, oftener of water, and the whole must be kept on the move till its hissing and bubbling announces boiling pitch, when it is ready.

Goodwin's difficulty lay in judging exactly the right moment for adding the water—he was often too soon or too late, with disastrous results. But the men were either too polite or not fastidious enough to grumble at the spoilt flavour—and ate the food placed before them with stoicism worthy of a better cause. Perhaps, hunger was often responsible for this.

Besides undertaking the culinary department, Goodwin had other duties to perform. Every morning the hogs had to be supplied with drinking water, and this involved considerable manual labour at the corral pump. It took rather more than two hours to fill the troughs, and by the end of the time his arms ached horribly. It was cruel, wearisome labour for one of delicate physique. But what Goodwin hated far more than the muscular strain was the mental inactivity. The monotony of the task was terrible. As his arms moved, and the rusty iron creaked and the water splashed, his eyes wandered vainly over the unlovely plain to find one spot whereon they could rest with pleasure.

So, on the whole, his new sphere of life was most unprepossessing, and differed totally from that to which he had looked forward. The "Romance of the Wild West" was dissipated; the bold, large-hearted ranchmen and cowboys were far removed from their material representatives—mean, cunning, petty farmers and dishonest hired hands.

To Goodwin the gradual revelation of the sordid side of human nature, the craft and subtilty of men, with their lust, their immorality, their cruelty, their treachery, was like a blow that staggered the foundations of his being. He sat in silent shame, with a strange thrill of indignation pulsing through him, as he listened to the vile badinage that always went on after meals. It was so new, so terribly new to him—and he felt his heart die within him as he heard it. A sudden transportation from heaven to hell could not have dismayed him more.

But this was only the beginning. His eyes were merely being opened to the foulness which does exist in one section of humanity. He had yet to find that the beloved ones, from whom he had lately parted, were to shatter his faith still more. And he had begun to count on them for sympathy and a ready audience when he returned. A scheme for leaving the ranch, getting to New York, and thence to England, and throwing himself trustfully upon their affections, was already forming in his brain. Unfortunately for him, he had not yet learned to mask his feelings.

The three men read him like an open book. They never ceased to watch him, trying to gather from his expression how long this fit of home-sickness was likely to last. Would it pass away and leave him resigned to his fate, submitting to sign away his freedom and transfer to them all the capital he possessed—or would it develop into a ruling passion?

There are some people, who, true to first impressions, never change their aversions, but hold to them through all vicissitudes. Goodwin was one of these. As a child he had had fixed ideas of

what life should be, given certain conditions; also he had been imbued with strong likes and dislikes that were never modified.

In his letters home he gave way to them, expatiating on the disappointment he was experiencing, on the uselessness of investing in so distasteful an enterprise. He seemed to be always poring over these letters—at least so it appeared to the Californian, who had undertaken the duties of spy. Such a task presented little difficulty—everything facilitated it. Bill had merely to return at an unexpected hour from his work, approach the house unobserved, and ensconce himself against the wall on the windowless side. There, by peering through some large cracks in the wall, he could observe much and deduce more.

More than once he had been surprised to see Goodwin kneeling on the floor in prayer; at other times he buried his face in his hands and relieved his feelings by violent, almost hysterical weeping. This behaviour was very novel to the hardened Californian, and, although he could not help feeling amused at the boy's prayers to a God in whom he himself disbelieved so thoroughly, it was not without pity that he beheld his grief.

Bill was not a thorough villain. Few weak—as the world calls “weak”—men are. He still had a heart, crusted as it was with a covering of sin, that was capable of a kind of sympathy. A volley of oaths would doubtless have appealed to him more than tears, but he was beginning to understand that all Englishmen were not cast in the mould of Holt and Rickman; that, on the contrary, some were gently nurtured, and compelled respect through their simple purity. Still, Bill could not afford to be scrupulous. He feared Holt too much to forsake him and side with the tenderfoot; so he applied himself to his work, and reported the things he had witnessed to the boss.

The argument that ensued between them produced a definite result. One evening, on the plea of posting a letter, Goodwin excused himself from supper and set off slowly towards the settlement. The ground in front of him was flat and bare for several hundred yards, without trees or bushes or anything behind which a man might lie. Then, however, at perhaps a quarter of a mile from the ranch came a slight rising, so slight that it was barely perceptible. It continued, however, till at the end of a mile a marked elevation had been reached, the soil being still brown and barren. Walking onwards and upwards, one came at last to a few trees and a patch of alfalfa, and here, in the heat of the day, it was not uncommon for drivers to recline for an hour's sleep.

Towards this oasis Goodwin directed his steps. The mission on which he was bent preoccupied him too much to allow his watchful faculties any chance of asserting themselves. Consequently, he was unaware of the fact that a man had followed in his wake warily, and at a distance, halting when he halted, advancing when he did, seeking the cover of the earth whenever he showed an~5 sign of looking backward.

At the clump of trees, the tracker threw himself down and enjoyed a rest till Goodwin's figure had diminished to a vanishing point in the distance, just where the plain dipped down into the settlement. Further delay might be dangerous, so Bill—for it was he—picked himself up and covered the intervening ground at an easy run. His quarry had by this time entered the main streets, for, like all Americans, the inhabitants of Vulture Point liked to call their little hamlet a “city,” and its tiny thoroughfares “streets.” The one in which Goodwin found himself was Republican Street, and there dwelt Joshua Brown.

Brown's store was open. It always was until late at night, when all chance of securing customers was past, for Josh did not like missing a chance, and worked hard to increase the pile of dollars lying secure in a far-off bank. He was not the man to trust a Bedford banker.

When Goodwin passed, he was greeted with a cheery “good-evening” by the keen-eyed American, who watched him, as if taking stock of some grocery sample, from the platform of his store. A few seconds after, the Californian passed, and the reason for his presence was well divined by the storekeeper.

“I guess they’re smart enough after the Britisher up at that ranch,” he observed meditatively to a man who was sitting by him.

“You bet!” was the reply, in that dry tone which imparts humour to everything a Yankee says. “The kid can’t smile without Holt wantin’ to know why. I saw it when I was round t’other day.”

The Californian slouched along, passed the smithy, the post-office, the drug store, still keeping Goodwin in sight, and not giving up the pursuit till he saw him take a sudden turn to the left and ascend by a beaten track the rugged side of a hill.

There was only one solution to this move, and that fitted in with Bill’s theory—the Englishman was going to the farm of John Carlton, a fellow-countryman, and the inveterate enemy of Holt.

Satisfied with this discovery, the Californian wheeled and sauntered back, calling in on his way at the largest hotel in the place. It was not palatial, having only four sleeping and two dining-rooms—good enough accommodation for Western folk.

Left to himself, with no further responsibility, Bill enjoyed the luxury of a drink, a smoke, a chew, and a quiet meditation on events past, present, and to come.

The man to whom Goodwin went had at one time away in the seventies been employed as a miner in the Northumberland coal-fields. Inveigled into a brawl with some drunken companions, he had so far forgotten the requirements of his country’s laws as to strike a killing blow. Fortunately for him, the scuffle took place in the dark, on an open space, and in a spot little frequented by the police. Aided by these circumstances, and unobserved by his intoxicated companions, he slipped away and ran home as fast as his legs could carry him. Without waiting a moment, he collected all his savings, and with a few articles of clothing stuffed hastily into a handkerchief, rushed off to the nearest station. Luck again favoured him—he was in time to catch the midnight train for London.

Thus in the morning, when the body was found, and a hue and cry raised, Carlton was many miles distant, meditating a trip to the United States. The golden prospects of the West had caught his fancy when a youth, and at a later period had led him to think seriously of emigrating. So, in his emergency, he naturally turned thither, and secured his ticket for New York on an outward bound liner.

Many years of ups and downs succeeded that memorable flight. Sometimes his pile grew until it was nearly large enough to buy a business and settle down to a quiet life; then, by some reckless act, it was diminished to—nothing. And this not once or twice, but often.

Chance guided him to marry a Chicago woman, presented him with a half-wilted son, and sent him to Oregon to seek a better fortune. Once, reduced to a state of absolute pauperism, he struck Vulture Point, and, hearing that hands were wanted at Holt’s ranch, he offered his services.

He and his family remained there for several months, faring neither better nor worse than other hired labourers. Had it not been for one thing, the enmity between him and Holt would never have arisen. Holt was a bully by nature. He was never so happy as when killing or wounding some animal. In the absence of such “sport” he led his companions a hard life with cursing and fault-finding. To such a man, Canton’s son offered an excellent butt; being a semi-idiot, he had neither strength nor spirit to resent the treatment he received.

Never was a youth subjected to more vindictive tyranny. Whenever his parents were absent, he was either made the laughing-stock of all the hired hoodlums, till they were tired of it, or else beaten and even brutally branded by Holt himself.

This latter torture was resorted to one day when Holt returned to the house and discovered that no meal had been prepared by young Carlton, who was fast asleep in a corner.

My client's demoniacal temper rose, and, quietly approaching the fire, he thrust a rod of steel between the bars. In a few moments it was heated red hot and applied to the bared chest of the helpless boy. It was useless to cry out; no one was near, and there was no pity in the eyes of the man who knelt upon him; he could only writhe under the torture, emitting the incoherent babblings of a weakened brain. Silence was enforced upon him by terrible threats, accompanied by repeated blows; and on the return of his parents, he dared not reveal to them the torments he had undergone.

One day, however, when Holt was engaged in his favourite recreation, Carlton came upon the scene—and a furious fracas took place. It looked like killing. Both men had closed and were fighting for their lives, both were wiry and hard as cast steel, and it is difficult to surmise which would have come out the victor, had not a party of travellers arrived and effected a separation. After this, Carlton sought shelter elsewhere, and finally fixed his quarters at the ranch on the hill-side. Smarting under a burning sense of wrong, he had shunned as much as possible the society of his fellow-men, and brooded alone over schemes of vengeance. This seclusion did not increase his popularity, and at the time of Goodwin's advent, no man in the district was more thoroughly detested than John Carlton, and no woman more consistently slandered than his wife. To be seen in their company was enough to secure the scathing condemnation of Vulture Point, expressed in the pithy Western phrase "of no account." After *that* has been said of a man, his last social hope is exterminated, the career of an outlaw lies inevitably before him.

When the news of Goodwin's arrival was noised in the settlement, a fact which Holt in his annoyance credited to the gossiping tongue of the Californian, Carlton resolved to get hold of the tenderfoot. Desperate as he was—the lease of the ranch was nearly up, and he had not a cent to his name—he saw in the newcomer a means to his end.

One morning, therefore, after careful reconnoitring, he approached Holt's ranch and knocked at the door. As he expected, no one but the Britisher was there. The boy was as usual a picture of misery, sitting by the table alone, thinking of home.

"Hullo!" Carlton exclaimed, as if surprised at the sight. "Why, what's up? In the blues, my boy! Come, cheer up, never say die! I reckon you and I are fellow-countrymen. Your hand, mister, I'm glad to make your acquaintance."

There was something so cheering in the visitor's unlooked-for appearance, to say nothing of the genial smile that hovered over his weather-beaten face, that Goodwin felt his heart yearn towards him. It was an act of Providence. God had heard his prayers, and had sent some one to comfort him! He was not backward in responding to the advance of the other. Their hands closed, and the hearty grip of the elder was as a strong tonic to the younger. he was too unsophisticated to know that Diaphernes' emissaries find a bland smile and a greeting of blustering fellowship their most excellent mask. To him this kindly grizzled veteran was the very incarnation of open-hearted charity, of that sort of friendliness that invites confidence.

After a brief conversation, Carlton came to the point, assuming a confidential air.

"The best thing you can do," he said, "is to get right away from here."

Goodwin felt a chill run through him. In one of these strange revelations men sometimes have, the whole scene seemed to have been enacted before at some far-off date. He knew he had been expecting its recurrence, and was crushed by the sense of impending evil.

Canton narrowly watched the effect of his words, and proceeded:

“Between you and me, this Holt is an utter rascal, what Yanks call a slick card. He and his chums have been looking for a chance to pull out of here—you may well look scared—because”—he sank his voice to a whisper—“the ranch is a fake, and doesn’t pay them a cent. What they wanted was a tenderfoot like you with a lump of brass, to be sucked in. They talked of you before you came as Rickman’s greenhorn, Holt’s sucker. There, Mister Britisher, that’s what’s the matter with you! Sez I to the missis, ‘Missis,’ sez I, ‘if that young Goodwin doesn’t move out at once, they’ll have the very skin off his back.’ Now, young man, what sez you?”

Goodwin was flabbergasted. This was even worse than he had imagined. What could he do? Should he trust this man, rely on his relations’ clemency and go to them, or wait to see how events shaped themselves. Carlton was waiting for his answer.

“To tell you the truth, Mr Carlton,” he began, “I’m very awkwardly placed. You see, my people at home have implicit confidence in this concern of Rickman’s, and I doubt if they would believe my yarn. They would think it a ruse to bolster up my return!”

“I reckon I might fix that for you,” was the quiet reply. “Just let me know how he gulled you out. Now come, you may rely on me. I’d sooner have my neck stretched than go back on a youngster like you.”

Thus pressed, Goodwin told him everything—how glad the folks at home had been to hear of an opening for him, how he had boasted of his determination to pile up a fortune, how glowingly Rickman had written of the ranch, and what a disappointment it had all been. He even spoke with winning innocence of his mother’s love, of his happy schoolboy life, of his financial prospects. He did not notice the glimmer in his new friend’s eyes when he spoke of the £500.

“Well, my boy,” observed Carlton, cutting himself a plug of tobacco, “you will live to see the old ones at home yet, maybe, if you follow my advice. If not—I don’t know—they don’t stick at much. I know a thing or two against two of them, at all events, which would be swinging matters in a law-abiding country.”

The old man arose. Even murderers are sometimes virtuous.

“Well, what *can* I do?”

The boy was at his wits’ end, an easy dupe for any unscrupulous man. Carlton smote his palm as if with sudden inspiration.

“I have it!” he cried. “Come along with me. In a few days, I’m going to Crescent City with my two horse team, to scout around for work. For a couple of dollars I’d carry your baggage, and plant you down there. There are plenty of tramps—coaling-ships I mean—that would take you to ’Frisco for next to nothing. Then you could get by train to New York, or direct to London in a sailing ship.”

The horror of his position was creeping with effect over Goodwin. In this project he saw some chance of escape, of breathing purer air uncontaminated by the wretches with whom he was daily in contact.

With the impulsiveness worthy of an Irishman, though there was not an ounce of Celtic blood in his veins, he leaped into the net extended before him.

“I will do it,” he said. “But you must put a note in my letter home, to back up my statements.”

This idea did not seem to please the ex-miner.

"I can't write," he said shortly, but added with a smile, "but the missis can. She would be just the right one. Will you come and see her. Drop in to-night; if you aren't too dainty, maybe we can manage some food to your liking."

Goodwin hesitated to accept the invitation. He must have some plausible excuse, otherwise his departure would arouse suspicion.

"Say you have a letter to post," suggested Carlton, "and you must catch the last mail. Put on a careless voice and stroll off across the desert—but keep your eyes skinned. That Californian is as sly as any coyote."

Nothing further of importance passed between them. With a parting warning, Canton mounted his horse and left the premises, watched earnestly by his new acquaintance until he passed out of sight across the brown desert.

With a tumult of conflicting emotions raging in his breast, the Englishman turned from the window to meet the enquiring gaze of Rickman, who had entered by the back door.

"Hullo, Neville!" cried the latter. "Been having company? Who is your new friend?"

There was only one course open to the desperate youth.

"I don't know," he said. "He never told me. Some one who came to see Holt, got tired of waiting, and went off saying he would call again."

Rickman said no more—but Goodwin wondered uneasily how much he knew.

That evening he made the excuse about the letter, and set off for the ranch on the hill-side. One thing he forgot to do—that was, to look behind! However, he had some excuse, he had seen the Californian go off to the orchard a few minutes before, and, imagined, therefore, that no spying on his part need be feared.

\* \* \*

The first thing that struck Goodwin's notice in Carlton's ranch was the evidence of extreme poverty everywhere apparent. The furniture was meagre and dilapidated, a broken-down bed serving in lieu of chairs; the table was propped up by a box to avoid imminent collapse; an old trunk smeared with grease doubtless served as a receptacle for kitchen utensils—one or two were resting upon it. For ornament, the room boasted a few soiled prints from illustrated papers, crookedly nailed against the wall.

If Neville Goodwin was unfavourably impressed by the dwelling, he was still less attracted by the lady of the house when she welcomed him. There was a hardness in the cold brown eyes, a thinness in the nostrils and lips that betokened innate and lurking cruelty; there was something repulsive in the broad sallow face and close black hair. Then her handshake lacked heartiness; it was cold and slimy. Noticing that he hesitated, she invited him to sit on the couch, apologised for lack of chairs, and said a good deal about his deigning to enter so humble an abode. The meal was very frugal—there was tea, but neither sugar nor milk, eggs and dry bread completed the fare. But what they lacked in eatables, they were willing to make up in conversation.

Mrs Carlton was vehement in her abuse of Holt.

"He is a scamp," she declared, "a rogue that would stop at nothing, not even murder. The way he treated Albert is enough to prove it."

"Ay," said her husband, "he treated him right bad. If there was any justice in this God-forsaken country, he might have swung for it. Lynch law has settled many a man for less."

The woman went on:

“It will be a good thing for you, lad, when you are clear of him. I reckon, though, there’ll be a trouble before they let you go.”

Goodwin drank his tea, feeling anything but comfortable. The thought of his departure being hindered had not occurred to him.

“Will there?” he enquired in a tone of such consternation that the Carltons exchanged meaning glances. But that glance to Goodwin was a full interpretation of the woman’s physiognomy, and put an end to any doubts he might have felt.

“When do you want to move,” was the next remark levelled at him over the narrow table.

“Not until I hear from home.”

“*What!*” the man’s and woman’s voices came together, and the former proceeded: “But, lad, I took it for granted you meant to quit without delay. You were to let me drive you over to Crescent City next week.”

Goodwin knew he was in an awkward position, but faced them coolly.

“Yes,” he said. “But I have changed my mind.”

“Have you seen Holt?”

There was almost a threat in the woman’s voice as she fixed her eyes on him.

As a rule, there is more subtlety of expression in dark than in light eyes—blue eyes are more perceptibly deceitful than the bolder brown—but in those of this woman, the meaning was palpable. Goodwin’s reply baffled her.

“No,” he said. “I have not seen Holt, and have had little conversation with Rickman, nothing bearing on the subject.”

There was no gainsaying this statement; it bore the unmistakable stamp of truth, and the speaker was a gentleman.

Like all her sex, Mrs Carlton hated to be thwarted by a man. She persevered.

“Don’t be a fool, young man,” she said, with the air of one speaking for his good. “It’s just this way with you—either you stay to be stripped of every blessed cent you’ve got, with perhaps a bullet in your brain as a keepsake—or else you go with my husband to live and strike oil elsewhere. That’s about the way of it. Which is it to be?”

But Goodwin did not falter, he inherited the bulldog tenacity of soldier ancestors, men who were always used to face long odds.

“I shall remain until I hear from home,” he replied, and to that reply he consistently adhered.

At last it dawned upon the worthy couple that this tenderfoot meant what he said, that perhaps he was not quite so simple as he looked. And they had perforce to let him abide by his decision, with a growing conviction that that £500 was not destined to come their way.

After promising to pay them another visit, Goodwin arose, and, afraid lest his relief at leaving them should be manifest in his tell-tale face, he bade them a hasty farewell.

The walk home seemed unusually long, perhaps because he was weary and had suffered much from the heat of the day. The desert seemed interminable, and, in spite of the clear moonlight that lit up the mountain and valley, he lost his way. Indeed, the moon was the cause of it. It reminded him of home, of the starlight nights when he and his mother used to sit together and speculate upon the mysteries of the heavens. But, stumbling along, heedless whither his feet carried him, quite by chance, he hit upon the right track, and after that it was not long until he was standing before the ranch.

A light in the kitchen told him that some of the men were still about, and, much to his chagrin, he perceived Holt in his favourite position on the platform, half hidden in the shadow of the wall. There was a strange, uncanny feeling in the air; a ghostly wind blew through the alfalfa and

lashed up the smouldering logs. The effect was heightened by the presence of my client, who, all unconsciously, took from me some traces of the invisible world of evil.

Goodwin shivered, Holt spoke first.

“Hullo!” he said. “Where the deuce have you been? We thought you were lost, and Bill wanted to get up a search party. Dear old Bill, he does love you like a brother.”

The arch hypocrisy of the last remark was too evident. What was he thinking about?

Neville at bay was cooler than Neville in action.

“I’ve been down to the settlement,” he said, “and lost my way coming back, which makes me so late.”

“Oh, lost your way? The moon is bright too—how very odd!” the satirical laugh jarred on Goodwin.

“It may seem odd to you,” he retorted with more spirit than one would have expected, “but I’m new to these night rambles, and I confess I have always to stand still and think before I can hit on the right track.”

Holt’s love of torture was coming well to the front. He leaned forward, his yellow eyes gleaming, and settled to his task with keen relish.

“I believe you mentioned that you had been to the settlement. May I venture to ask when?”

“Pray don’t apologise. I don’t in the slightest mind telling you. I was there an hour ago.”

“Did you pass Brown’s store?”

“Yes.”

“Didn’t you see Bill?”

“Bill? No, was he there?”

“Yes,” rejoined my client, enjoying the other’s slight discomfiture. “Bill *was* there, in fact was there for more than two hours, and has only just got back. Curious you didn’t meet, isn’t it?”

“I suppose I was walking with my eyes shut; it’s a habit I’ve got into.”

“A queer habit and a dangerous one. Yes, I reckon you were; still, it’s a coincidence. Had supper?”

“No—am I too late?”

“I reckon not. If you ain’t particular, you’ll find a bite of something and a dipper of cold tea.”

To keep up the role of the lar, Goodwin accepted the offer and made a meal of half-baked “damper.” This finished, he crept up to his bed in the room above, and in a very short time his breathing announced to the Californian, who as usual was listening close at hand, that he was asleep.

An hour later, the three ranchmen sat below discussing Goodwin’s fate.

“It must be done,” my client said, putting away the lamp and resting his elbow on the table.

The room was a fit meeting-place for conspirators, flooded as it was with the white light that streamed through the lattice window, showing up the pale countenances of the inmates. The fire had died out, but not long enough since for the ashes to have ceased slipping from their places within the bars and breaking the silence by their fitful movements. An uneasy quiet succeeded the last words. The Californian, unable to stand it any longer, at last broke in:

“How about the money, Ed?”

“That’s safe. Whitely has it fast enough, the old lady sent it with a babbling letter a week ago. She didn’t wait for her darling to write, but, thinking it would tend to make him settle to his interesting occupation, she forwarded it without delay.”

“Why didn’t you tell us before?” muttered Rickman.

“How could I? I only knew it myself this morning. I met Whitely.”

“Then, I reckon the sooner we get to work the better,” quoth Bill, with greedy anticipation.

“Just so! I, for my part, have an idea—but I daresay you have too—eh, Rickman?”

Rickman became suddenly and mysteriously intelligent.

“Ye—es,” he drawled, imitating unconsciously the Yankee inflexion. “I’ve a sort of notion how to work it.”

(Both my hands were rubbing the brow of my client.)

“Well,” Holt said slowly, with an impressive pause now and then, “let each of us try his plan in turn. *But*—” and a death-like silence ensued till he continued,—“but we must exercise the utmost caution; we have enemies—Carlton, his wife, and several others. Nothing must be done to arouse suspicion—no clumsy bungling. Sabbey?”

Again a silence followed, even more horribly intense than the former. The moonlight seemed to burst into a stronger flood, the shadows to assume more unearthly shapes, the baying of the coyotes to resemble ghostly voices. A chilly blast of wind blew with a creaking sound through the doorway; the lamp gave one feeble flicker and died out. A terror of darkness seemed to fall on the trio, making them fear to move. Holt recovered first.

“We are a pack of fools,” he observed, “to be scared by the moon. Now to business. You shall try first, Rick; but how?”

“Leave that to me,” was the reply. “I’ve thought it out. Are you sure of the money, that’s all? I don’t care about meddling in the matter otherwise.”

“You needn’t fear that.”

“And our shares?”

“£150 each. £50 to Whitely.”

“That’s all Chinese to me,” growled the Californian, “what does it mean in dollars?”

“\$750 each. Now, are you satisfied?”

“I’m on,” observed Rickman, complacently gazing out of the window. He was no longer afraid.

“And if you fail?” queried my client.

“Then I’ll take my turn,” Bill answered for him, chewing his tobacco in savage earnestness. To look at him, one would have credited him with the courage of a lion, but I knew better than that.

“Then if you fail I will try.”

My client, when roused, could not speak like an ordinary man—he either shouted, or hissed out his words with a stress that would have been ridiculous in a speaker of less threatening aspect.

I gently caressed the ill-shaped head. “And succeed,” I whispered to his feverish brain.

Springing from his chair, he moved noiselessly across the floor to a corner of the room, to the astonishment of his companions, who scarcely knew him in this new phase of excitement.

“What the deuce are you up to?” Rickman enquired anxiously. There was no knowing what might happen on a night like this—a night that seemed fit to shelter a hundred lurking assassins.

“Drink to the luck of our enterprise,” Holt said, placing a whisky keg on the table.

“Yes, we will,” said the others, but they cast apprehensive looks around.

“Then pledge yourselves to be steadfast—no looking back.”

My client fixed them in turn with his yellow eyes, strong in my power.

The men were spellbound for a moment; he seemed to them an incarnation of the evil they dared not resist. Then, shaking off their nervousness, they repeated his toast—“No looking back!”

So, on that night, in a lone ranch on the desert of the Vulture Point, did three men, aided, though they knew it not, by a chosen emissary of the Prince of Darkness, drink a dipper of raw

whisky, and their toast was the murder of an English boy—a pale, weary boy, who lay sleeping above them, his unconscious face turned to the stars he loved.

## CHAPTER XII

### PROGRESS OF THE TENDERFOOT

Four weeks had elapsed since Goodwin's arrival, and, during that time, he had been treated rather as a guest than as a ranch hand. Every consideration had been shown him, every device tried to make him alter his opinion of the ranch life. But, in spite of their care, of the restraint the men placed on their tongues, of the virtuous sentiments they were beginning to express, the tenderfoot clung to his first impressions. He hated the place, the men, their ways; and nothing would make him change his views.

Of Carlton he had seen nothing since his visit to the ranch on the hill; and from this he inferred that he must be away working "up country." Goodwin was not sorry; he instinctively felt that the tender mercies of Canton and his wife might be worse than those of Holt. At least, in the settlement it was known where he was. Would Holt and his confederates dare to ill-use him, with every probability of being found out? He thought and hoped not.

Early one morning he set out for the post-office, and received with trembling hands the long-desired letter. Without any doubts as to its contents, he waited until no one was in sight to read it.

His mother wrote:

"On no account, my darling boy, must you come home. After all the expense of your journey and outfit, it would be foolish to return before giving the life a fair trial. As to the tales you have heard about Holt and his friends, don't believe them. They are probably invented by his enemies—all prosperous people, you know, have enemies—and of course you meet with plenty of unscrupulous rogues ready to poison the minds of young men like you against any one they dislike. Why, my dear boy, Mr Rickman is an old Clevelonian—how can you be so foolish? I think you owe him, at least, an apology. Now, please, be sensible. You will soon get over your home-sickness, get into your work, and come back in a few years strong and hardy, for a holiday. The £500 is waiting for you in Whitely's bank. Invest it in the syndicate as soon as you like, but get a lawyer to see that all is straight, and the share properly attested. Cheer up, darling boy, and be brave. You can't expect life to be all roses and no thorns; we have all had and are having our battles, though you might never think it. What poor Christian soldiers we should make if we were to turn tail and run away at the first onset."

The rest was merely affectionate messages from various members of the family.

To Goodwin the disappointment was intense. It was evident that his return would vex them, and lower him in the estimation of all. So there was nothing to be done but remain and force himself to endure the life which seemed at this moment more intolerable than ever.

Thoroughly disheartened, he returned to the ranch, with, however, one firm determination in his mind. He was resolved not to part with the £500 till fully convinced that his instinctive aversion to Holt and his friends was indeed unjustifiable. He was thinking this over when he encountered my client sauntering down the track towards him.

"Hullo, youngster!" he cried (and I slipped my arm into his as he spoke), "down in the blues on such a lovely morning? Come, buck up! Where have you been?"

Now, there was no one Goodwin less desired to meet than Holt, and fearing that he might betray his sentiments, the boy simulated neuralgia.

“To the drug store,” he said, holding his hand to his face. “My teeth bothered me all last night.”

“Sorry to hear it. Could Joe Edmunds do anything for you?”

“No—at least, he was out.”

“Well, have a pull of whisky, you will find some in the keg. I know of nothing better for neuralgia. Oh, by the bye, Neville,” the words came slowly, as if something important was to follow, “we have been talking about the syndicate. It is proposed to add on a couple of hundred yards to the orchard, and stock it with the best apple and pear-trees. This, of course, means an immediate outlay, and the question of funds crops up. Rickman will invest \$500, Brooke and I \$400 each. I believe you have some idea of joining us, and have a certain capital already banked in Bedford. Oh, don’t look surprised! Rickman heard about it from your mother.”

The boy walked slowly along, kicking the stones in his way. What could he say?

“Look here, Mr Holt,” he began, with a sudden inspiration, “to be candid, I don’t like the life here at all. The climate disagrees with me, the people are not to my taste, and the work isn’t congenial.”

He stopped, because he saw that the other was smiling at him, in the manner which fathers assume when they wish to look forbearing towards the hastiness of youth! It was a galling smile, and Neville writhed inwardly. What could he do if Holt persisted in regarding his case from that standpoint.

“We all thought as you do when we first came out,” the elder man said gently, “but, after the comparison with the old country became less fresh in our minds, we got over the home-sickness; and now, why, we wouldn’t change with any business men in England. Where would you get such magnificent, wild, unlimited country—such freedom, such healthy conditions of work?” Then suddenly dropping from the oratorical style into his natural tone, “but what do you mean to do if you leave us? Return to England, to the regret of your friends, and your own, when you come to your senses and say as your excuse that you didn’t like the life? It would be rather weak, wouldn’t it? And, once back, what will you do? Go into an office, and drudge away in a stuffy room behind a counter with ten hours’ work in front of you each morning, and a fortnight’s holiday in the year? Would you like *that* after your freedom here? Come, my boy, I’m old enough to be your father, and have been through the mill of life enough, at any rate, to see the difference between advantages and disadvantages. Besides, I am no idle speculator or adventurer, but a hard-headed business-man, who can distinguish between a good and bad deal, and calculate profits to a nicety. Come, what do you say? Your share will bring you in an income, not princely at first, but enough to secure you a fair position in the place, with a pretty little nest-egg in the bank. Come, cheer up; look at it from a manly point of view. Think of those at home and what they expect of you.”

Goodwin listened to this harangue unmoved. He was not one to be swayed from his settled course by a man’s words—least of all by the words of a man whom he distrusted. So he bit his under-lip and kept silence.

This roused my client. He felt a string of oaths pulling at his tongue, and kept them back only by a great effort. They had by this time reached the gate in the fence, and a troop of hogs that had broken loose from the corral scattered at their approach.

“Aren’t you ready with your answer,” Holt asked, trying to keep up his pleasantness with a weak attempt at a smile.

But the reply, when it came, did not please him.

“I am still of the opinion that I shall never like the life, and therefore, with many thanks to you all the same, I must finally decline to put my money into the suggested scheme.”

The tenderfoot meant what he said. There was no doubt of that, and, leaving Holt to his own company, Goodwin started in pursuit of the refractory swine.

Thrusting his hands into his pockets, with sidelong glances at the retreating figure trampling over the squirrel grass, Holt suddenly returned to the house. There was no one in the room. Throwing himself on a chair, and putting his feet on the table, he let his head sink on his breast, and grumbled himself to sleep. The terrific heat and an unusually large draught of whisky had produced a sense of lassitude.

While he slept, I lost no opportunity of pouring into his muddled brain grotesque schemes of robbery and murder. Murder in the kitchen, murder on the desert, murder on the mountain—but always murder. The yellow-jackets buzzed round him, the flies settled in swarms all over him, the fleas rejoiced at his indifference—he slept on. The rest of the day passed uneventfully.

On the morrow, after the men had been gone to the orchard for about an hour, Rickman came running back to the house. In his haste, he stumbled over the platform, cursing in consequence with such zeal that Goodwin left off washing his dishes to come out and ask:

“Anything wrong?”

“I’ve had a bit of a spill, that’s all. Have you seen my bandanna?”

The article was produced, but Rickman seemed in no hurry now. Resting on the wooden bench, he regarded his own boots with an air of perplexity. Suddenly he said:

“Neville—old chap.”

“Yes!”

He was not often called “old chap.”

“Will you do me a good turn?” The honest ring in the voice disarmed suspicion for once.

“By all means, if I can.”

“Why, there is some brute of a dead animal in the well. Didn’t you notice how the water stinks? Holt asked me to get it out; he ought to have come to help, but there’s an extra pressure of orchard work just now. Will you lend a hand?”

“Yes, certainly. What can I do?”

They walked slowly towards the well; the heat of the day was beginning to make itself felt, and the sun’s rays blazed down on the desert. A few two-horse teams were visible lazily moving along the tracks *en route* for the settlement or Bedford; trails of smoke crept up from far-off ranch chimneys, and an interminglement of sound bore witness that the life of the day was advancing. Neither of the men going towards the well, however, paid much heed to these things.

“If you are afraid of being lowered, don’t be ashamed to say so,” said Rickman genially. “You wouldn’t be strong enough to hold and pull me up—but, of course, we *can* leave it till Holt returns.”

He was looking down at the dark water surface twelve feet beneath, where floated the remains of a small animal, a stoat.

“No, I’m not afraid,” said Goodwin readily. “You’ve got plenty of grit for a kid.” It was spoken approvingly, as Rickman picked up a rope.

“Wind this round your body—so—” he commanded, and for better security, proceeded to fasten it himself.

A few seconds later, the tenderfoot was hanging over the water, clutching the rope with one hand, and, with the other, fishing for the corpse by means of a pail.

There was a half-scared expression in the blue eyes above. I saw it without surprise, it fitted in with my estimate of the man’s character. Goodwin did not see; he was too intent on his

unsavoury task, too eager to get it over. The stench sickened him, and the water seemed alive with slimy insects.

Just as he had succeeded, and the dead animal lay at the bottom of the bucket, there was an ominous thinning of the rope at one particular spot, a terrible wrench, and a sharp cry of warning. Splash! The boy was struggling in ten feet of water, without swimming space, without means of support, for the walls of the well were clean cut.

Rickman stood in helpless bewilderment. He was a better actor than one would have supposed. In answer to his victim's cries for help, he moaned his inability to do anything.

At last, when the hands had ceased to claw at the unfriendly walls, and floundered piteously, beating and splashing, in the water; when the white, despairing face sank deeper and deeper, and the voice was almost stifled, then, and not till then, did Rickman stir.

He turned round to look for some pole with which he could make a pretence of rendering aid, when, to his intense alarm, he met the angry stare of a stranger's eyes.

A traveller had arrived in the nick of time. With the acuteness of the eastern American he had grasped the situation as he reached the fence, and seeing a rope near by, picked it up and hurried upon the scene.

With a significant motion towards his hip pocket, he bade Rickman descend, and the murderer dared not disobey. As he was lowered, a click overhead warned him that no fooling would be tolerated, and so, greatly against his will, he brought up the drowning boy. Hitherto but few words had passed between him and the stranger. The interview that followed the rescue was chiefly composed of reference to the realms of my royal master. Nor was the stranger's parting advice to be despised; at least, Rickman was prepared to pay it due respect.

"If that there kid ain't alive and kicking when I look in to-morrow night, there'll be hell for more than one of you, or my name am' t Mitchell. Sabbey?"

Rickman assented eagerly. His attempt had passed with failure, and now he wished only to do the best for himself. Besides, the name of Mitchell was not unfamiliar, it carried with it the idea of popularity, and a reputation for marksmanship second to none in Thompson County.

Trying to bring Goodman back to health was not altogether unpleasant to Rickman. To my disgust, the man was weak enough to feel thankful that the guilt of murder was not to lie at his door. He had dreamt of hanging a good deal lately.

Still, he awaited Holt's return with uneasiness. He wondered whether he feared an outburst of fury or a turn of calm cynicism the most. Holt was rather to be dreaded in either mood. The boy did not require much attention. He lay in a corner of the sitting-room, where the stranger had placed him to be out of the sun's rays. There was nothing between him and the boards, except a threadbare cushion under his head. The wet overalls had been taken off, and he had been wrapped in a blanket. This consideration also, he owed to the stranger.

Knowing that I had plenty of leisure time, I wandered over the estate, looking at the growing shrubs, at the older fruit-burdened trees, and at the fallen fruit rotting on the ground below. There were many varieties of apples, and one especially fine—a large purple-tinted fruit, not so juicy as those grown in England, but far more splendid to look at. I estimated that the products of the orchard on the whole would not pay for the gathering; that it would be more profitable to fatten the hogs on the fruit than to send it to the Bedford market. But, from an artistic point of view, the orchard was the redeeming feature of the ranch. It was a pretty oasis in a hideous, scorching wilderness.

A few mornings later I again visited the spot, and this time extended my wanderings to the cornfield. There were none of the golden ears, none of the swaying yellow stalks, none of the

scarlet poppies, or blue cornflowers of the idealistic summer scenery—only a broad expanse of green or brown, of sharp keen-edged blades, of rough soil, cracked, baked, and uneven. In the middle of the field the three conspirators were engaged in gathering the daily crop for the corral.

Holt stood in a cart, pitchfork in hand, levelling the sheaves as they came up to him. The other two, one on either side, were clearing the allotted rows. It was a monotonous task, and one which must have wearied men whose spheres of life should have been elsewhere.

To the Californian, it was second nature. Born on the prairies, he had fulfilled this and similar tasks ever since, as a little red-headed urchin, he parted from his mother, and left her saturated with drink in the arms of Death. He had trusted to chance, and chance had led him a reckless, dare-devil dance. Toil, money, drink; drink, more toil, money; in and out of luck, always in sight of Diaphernes, Californian Bill had followed the luck of the West with the same unconcern as he showed at his present occupation.

The sun blazed down upon the men, as if determined to roast them where they stood.

Rickman was the first to falter. Leaning on his pitchfork, he looked up at Holt from under his broad-brimmed hat.

“It’s too hot for anything,” he said.

With an agile leap that would have scared an earthly athlete, I sprang upon the stack and stood beside my client. As I guessed, he was brooding over the failure of Rickman’s plot. His face would not have been a pleasant study for a nervous person.

“If Bill is going to play the fool as you did, Ern,” he said, wiping his face with his bandanna, “the sooner I’m out of your company the better. You behaved like a thorough greenhorn.”

Rickman scowled.

“Oh, I’m not afraid of offending you,” the other went on; “you can’t move from here without my help. I’m the hand that moves the machine, the brain that thinks for you both. Why in thunder you couldn’t do for the boy before Mitchell arrived passes me! It would have been simple enough to keep him under with a pole; and you said there was one handy.”

“You see I am not so clever as you,” retorted Rickman in a voice of increasing anger.

“It wouldn’t have taken a genius to have done *that!* Upon my word, a nipper fresh from the schoolroom couldn’t have managed worse. It will be doubly hard now, since the settlement have got wind of our game. However, it’s no use groaning over a broken leg, the best remedy is to lie low and have no further monkeying.”

The men sulkily agreed; and, finding that there was enough corn in the cart to satisfy the capacity of the hogs, they took their way homewards.

\* \* \*

A week went by. The youngster progressed so favourably and received such assiduous attention that he was able to resume his household work, much to the edification of his friends from the Point, for quite a number of folk, not all actuated by sympathy, had come out to see him. In answer to their enquiries he unreservedly praised to them the kindness of Holt and his allies; and this doubtless lulled to sleep the suspicions in many minds.

So, for a week there was calm—a refreshing change to the young Englishman, who found himself the object of more kindness than he had ever expected Westerners were capable of showing. Invitations to dinner and supper, to a friendly candy-pulling, to spend a few quiet days, were showered upon him by good-hearted ranchmen. Even Josh Brown did not begrudge an extra meal from his larder; the Britisher must walk over to the store and stay a few hours, just to

cheer him up a bit after his spell of sickness! He looked right down bad, with one foot in the grave—to be sure he had never been stout, but—well, he must have a chat with Mrs Brown and the girls, and mebbe that would physic him better than being by himself up at the ranch.

Neville was not loath to avail himself of this invitation. The Browns were nice-looking girls, with a superior taste in dress and a better tone in their voices than the usual set of Vulture Point ladies. It was a pity that Cora spat like a man, and that Belinda had a trick of dropping an occasional oath; but, for all that, Neville found it pleasant to while away his spare moments in their company. There was an unreservedness and sincerity about them very engaging after the conventional coldness of the ordinary English girl.

Weighing these facts in the balance, Goodwin found the scales turn in favour of the Misses Brown, and took to their company with a relish that would have aroused the suspicions of the British matron; but the old folk didn't go a cent for stand-offishness, and let him run a friendship as he pleased. There was a gun in the corner if he transgressed the laws of the household; that reminder would serve to keep him within bounds.

But the calm could not last for ever. There came a time when the dark clouds, always gathering in the horizon, gave vent to their passions and belched forth thunder, with the lightning that seems to kill, and often kills.

One afternoon, while the tenderfoot was still busy washing dishes, my client entered the barn to saddle his mare. He intended to ride over to Bedford and see Whitely.

Just as he swung the saddle over the creature's back, a dark figure filled the doorway, and the voice of the Californian proclaimed that "he had got a bully notion!"

"What's that?" said Holt indifferently.

"Why, the rattler is still under the log pile!"

"And what of that?" was the sharp retort; really Bill must be a born idiot.

"What of it? It could do a lot! Sabbey?"

There was such a triumphant ring in the voice, that the fellow really had to be taken down a peg or two.

"You infernal fool, do you imagine that with any ass's head like yours, the rattler will be of any use to us

Bill looked hurt, and fidgeted uncomfortably. "You're mighty hard on me, I reckon, Ed; say, when did you ever know me spoil a trick?"

"When, you son of a gun? Why, always, from the first day I was fool enough to give you a job."

The straws were flying from under the boots now. "Well, Holt, I bet you one hundred to one in dollars that I make no blunder this time."

"Then I won't take it. Money is too scarce on this ranch for that sort of thing. Keep that door open! I'm off! Do your best, you can't do more. So long!"

My client had mounted, and in a few moments was leaping over the desert in a cloud of dust that trailed behind like the smoke of a ship.

Bill looked after him and sniffed contemptuously.

"Called me a fool, did he? I'll show him right away that I'm smarter than he reckons!"

\* \* \*

The youngster was in the kitchen when Bill sauntered carelessly into the house.

“Young man,” he said with an air of authority, “I’ll trouble you to lend me a hand. The boss sez to me just now, ‘Bill, I’ve lost a white-handled knife.’ ‘Where to?’ sez I. ‘Well,’ sez he, ‘I reckon it’s gone beneath that blamed pile of faggots, and as I want it to-morrow, will you look after it.’ I did, but the hole he showed me is too small for my fist. Mebbe yours would go into it.”

Neville came out. It seemed hotter than ever as they crossed the yard; the hogs slaking their thirst plunged not only their snouts but half their bodies into the troughs. It was a fine specimen of Oregon heat.

Goodwin felt sick. The usual smell of something dead came across the desert; there is nothing more loathsome.

“Which is the hole?” he inquired as they arrived at the pile.

The Californian indicated the spot with a jerk of his thumb.

“Down there, kid!”

Neville threw himself on the ground, and, after a little hesitation, began to grope in the dark recess with his hand.

But he barely repressed a cry as his fingers closed on something cold and scaly, something in coils that moved when touched. Ugh!

“What is it, kid?” enquired Bill.

A yell of pain and terror was the answer. The ruse had succeeded. Infuriated at being awakened from a cosy nap, the snake had attacked the first thing that came handy, which, of course, was the palm of Neville Goodwin.

“Something has bitten me,” he exclaimed, as he nursed the injured member in his lap.

“Let me have a look,” said Bill. “Why, that’s nothing, kid, you jammed it on a nail. Where’s the knife.”

But the boy did not answer. A horrible faintness was creeping over him, and he was chilled as if by the wind from a vault.

Bill chuckled inwardly. There was no mistake this time, no bungling, the rattler had answered the purpose! A thrill of triumph ran all through him, and he was picturing how crestfallen Holt would be, when he received an unpleasant surprise.

Somebody coughed close at hand.

“Hullo!” he exclaimed, making a feeble endeavour to keep up appearances.

A woman stood behind him, eyeing him with a stern glance of enquiry that changed to pity as her eyes fell on the boy’s face.

The Californian knew her, and cursed his luck.

“Pleased to see you, Mrs Barnes,” he muttered as politely as his education permitted.

“That’s a darned lie, Bill Brooke! You ain’t a bit pleased, but just mighty mad, that’s what’s the matter with you. Let me see your hand, young man,” she continued, addressing Neville. “That’s no nail, it’s a rattler’s bite! Quick, hustle yourself, you long-legged Californian scum! What, you won’t? Then, I reckon I’ll raise hell before I’m done with you.”

Bill saw tragedy in her look, and “hustled.”

“What do you want?” he enquired in a whisper.

“Whisky—a keg full—every blessed drop you’ve got, and just stir those shakety joints of yours.”

Bill was off, covering the ground with kangaroo leaps. When he returned, he found the woman on her knees beside the prostrate boy, rubbing him with all her might.

“Anything to keep the circulation afloat,” she muttered. “Here, clumsy, give me the keg.”

With more haste than gentleness she poured a stream of the fiery liquid down Goodwin's throat, and more, and more, till it seemed as if his whole being must be saturated with it.

"Help me scrub him," she ordered, and Bill obeyed. Between them they kept Life at her post, and Death again stole away into the background.

Of the three it would be hard to say which perspired the most; perhaps the tenderfoot showed the effects of the heat most plainly, for the water rolled off his chest in streams.

"Small thanks to you, Bill Brooke, the boy's life is spared," said Mrs Barnes, as they carried the still fainting sufferer between them to the house. "You are even a bigger devil than I took you for. What will the boys at the Point say?"

That was a question Bill would rather have left unanswered. He saw in fancy the followers of Judge Lynch, a grim band of men not all strangers to him, with ugly expressions on their faces, and shiny six-shooters in their hands. He saw a rope and a noose, and watched it swinging from a high branch. He might have seen more, had not his imagination been checked by their arrival at the house.

"It seems to me, Mr Brooke," Mrs Barnes remarked as they placed the boy on a heap of old sacks in the coolest corner of the sitting-room, "that you have lost the use of your tongue."

She always said "Mr" when she desired to be sarcastic, and it generally took effect. Besides, Bill knew what the Vulture Point crowd thought of him.

"I reckon you can talk enough for us both," he retorted, without looking at her.

"It would pay you to be polite, *Mr* Brooke."

Bill winced, as the stress on the "*Mr*" was more marked.

"What's the good of my telling you I reckoned the kid had hit his hand on a nail?"

"It ain't no good, 'cause I ain't so green as to swallow it. Weren't *you* bitten by a rattler last year? That's once I know of, and maybe you've had more bites in the course of your ramblings. You're ugly enough to have been bitten all over—yes! It's a year come next week that my ole man sez to me, 'Celia, Bill Brooke up at Holt's has been bitten by a rattler,' and my ole man never fooled me yet. He knows better."

She said this between her teeth with such conviction that the Californian was impressed. He mopped his forehead as if to gain time before answering.

"You're hard on me," he said at length.

"Hard on you?" Bill shuddered at the scorn in her tones. "Hoity-toity! Listen to Mr Brooke complaining! He says I'm hard on him. Are you so delicate, may I ask, that you want some quinine? I reckon I can cure you. You meant to kill that lad now ain't it so?"

Bill fell back. There was no misreading the guilt in his coward eyes, blanched face, and cringing body. All the bravado had gone out of him. He would have liked to fall on his knees and beg for mercy, but he only whispered—

"It's a lie."

"Are you sure, now, you didn't mean to kill him?" the woman went on, like one delighting in torture, for what woman is not cruel at times? "Are you sure you don't know the difference between a nail scratch and a rattler's bite? It's you are the liar, Bill,—you—you—you!"

She was the incarnation of an avenging spirit now. There is strong dramatic talent latent in the West—and this slatternly dressed woman had the fire of it in her veins.

Bill stared at her wrathful figure as she pointed a hard finger at him, denouncing him. Her words seemed to fill the room, to drift out and away over the desert to the sleeping settlement. Already in his mind's eye, he saw the people roused, heard their cries for vengeance, and perceived their dust trails in the distance creeping nearer and nearer.

“Are you satisfied, Mr Brooke?” she went on, “for I am. Nurse that boy well and see that he is fit when I come next—or—There are queer stories in the settlement already, you see—and it is possible folk may feel like lynching all your blessed gang if this comes out.”

With a warning nod to Bill, she stooped, kissed the boy affectionately, and went out.

The Californian felt stifled till she was fairly across the threshold, and on her way to the fence. Then the reaction set in. He threw himself down and cursed long and loudly.

So Neville Goodwin survived. But there still remained the attempt of the third conspirator.

## CHAPTER XIII

### EXIT OF THE TENDERFOOT

Of all the sights in America for vastness, for weirdness, for singularity, nothing, not Niagara itself, can beat Crater Lake. Away in the Cascades, in the region of great forests where the giant pine towers over a primitive world, where the tourist has never trespassed, where, until lately; the Indian has wandered at large, where the glories of Nature rest undisturbed, lies Crater Lake. There the eagle builds in peace, the panther and the grizzly bear find secure retreats for their offspring—here the weak are dragged to slaughter and devoured by the strong of the forest; here the rattle-snake attains enormous dimensions, and gay-coloured reptiles sport in the pools.

There are a few tracks through the forest, but very few and seldom frequented except in the beginning of the fall, when parties of settlers fly from the plains for a change to the cool air of the quiet mountains.

Following the largest of these tracks past the Hole in the Ground, one comes to a steep ascent covered with bushes and jagged rocks. Up—up, till the limbs ache and the heart grows weary; up, till the feet blister; up, up, past tree after tree, boulder alter boulder, till the forest ends and the horizon expands with an immense view on all sides, and one stands on a soft grassy plateau. If it be evening, the dying light crimsons the western sky, and gilds the mountain tops till the pines stand out as shadows, kisses the glades of the forest, and plays iridescent on the waters of the lake.

These perpendicular rocks are no playthings, but gaunt, terrible cliffs, studded here and there with pines that look tiny in spite of their two hundred feet, springing out from cliffs where one would hardly believe they could find nourishment. From this giddy height, one looks down sheer into the cold, clear water, leading, as some suppose, into the very bowels of the earth.

Woe to the reckless man who ventures too near the edge and falls! Woe to the climber who dares the descent; woe to the unwary traveller lost in the grey mist, or to the suicide who leaps headlong over. This is a decoy of Nature, one of her chosen sanctuaries.

It was on this plateau that a party of men halted one evening at the commencement of the fall. They were weary with a week's travelling, the roads had been heavy, the weather bad, and the horses fretful. A heavy grey mist hid the lake from view, and limited the landscape to a radius of a few feet. Three of the wayfarers knew well how far they might wander, but the fourth was a boy—a tenderfoot; and what does a tenderfoot know of hidden pitfalls?

In spite of inward premonitions, in spite of friendly warnings from well-meaning folk~ at Vulture Point, Neville Goodwin had consented to be one of the party now preparing the lakeside camp.

When my client turned to his inventive faculties for an idea to solve the problem of the Lsoo, it was I who came to his assistance.

One evening, as he slept in the veranda, I prayed to Diaphernes for a dream. One came straight from the West where the sun had long since set. It was an uncanny dream, white and expressionless as it hastened to me, bloody and devilish as I sent it into his brain. That night in his sleep he seemed to stand on the shore of the Silent Lake, and in the moonlight he perceived, to his right, the form of an Indian, whose back was turned towards him, gazing over the water. And it dawned on him that he was there for murder, and that the figure in front was he whom he was intended to kill. As he looked, a cold clammy hand touched his shoulder, and, looking round, he beheld with terror a spectre clothed as a monk, grinning ghoulishly into his face.

“See!” it whispered, and snapped its fleshless jaws, “see, thine enemy, the man who stands between thee and wealth! Take him unawares, for the waters of the lake which thou beholdest are eager for blood. Lose not the golden opportunity.”

The apparition laughed with mocking encouragement, and Holt wavered no more, and the bright moon smiled at his victim and lulled his suspicions, so that he heeded not the steps on the pass. So his foe was upon him before he had time for defence. Even as he raised his eyes in mute appeal to the stars, he was whirled into the cauldron beneath. And, as the Indian fell, my client perceived that he had the face of Neville Goodwin.

\* \* \*

Holt woke with a start. The dream had done its work. It gave him the idea of a picnic to Crater Lake.

Americans and Englishmen have different ideas of a picnic. In America every one works hard, looking after the horses, fixing the tents, keeping up the water supply, providing and cooking the food—no one is idle, all work as hard as they do on the ranches, perhaps harder. In England the general idea is, who can be most idle—and as a rule there are a number of ties for that honour.

All the party in question had plenty to do. They had taken it in turns to drive, and the task had been no light one. Waggons have a nasty trick of breaking down at a critical moment, perhaps in a narrow pass with a wall of rock on one side and a precipice on the other. No driver can guard against such eccentricities. It is “purely dependent on chance,” as the ruined gambler says. We, Diaphernes’ emissaries, know better.

A wet dew covered the ground, saturating the men’s clothes, the food, the blankets. Nothing kept it out. A more dismal picnic could not have been found outside Oregon. A heavy depression hovered in the air, diminishing to zero whatever hopes they had entertained of a cheerful repast. The Californian’s overalls came half-way up his legs, rendering him a most comical figure. I was the only one who could appreciate such a spectacle; my mortal companions were all crouching round the camp fire. The cold damp penetrated to their bones; two of them at least cursed the mission that led them thither. Kneeling on the damp sward, I whispered to my client that the time for action had arrived.

Neville Goodwin had left the group, and had almost disappeared into the mist. Observing, however, that he paused as if afraid to proceed, my client called out genially—“It’s all right, youngster, keep right on. The lake is half a mile away yet. Have a good walk and give your circulation a chance.”

Whether Goodwin believed him, or despairingly resigned himself to his fate, is not for me to say. I had my ideas on the subject, but decline to commit myself. He certainly walked straight forward, the eyes of all following him.

He might have gone thirty or forty yards when he came to a standstill. The plateau had ceased. He seemed to stand on the brink of another world, with an impenetrable atmosphere before and beneath him. He stared helplessly, vainly trying to pierce the thickest mist he had ever seen.

“Now or never,” I murmured to my client, who, arising from the fire, had cautiously followed the retreating figure.

A large piece of rock attracted my attention; it lay half-buried in loose soil, sharp edge uppermost, not a dozen yards from where Holt was walking. I directed his eyes towards it. He needed no second prompting; with a cunning agile movement he darted towards it, and in less than a second it whizzed in a straight line for Neville Goodwin’s head.

The crash was soft and irresistible—no mortal skull ever withstood such a blow. The bone splintered to pieces, and, as the boy tottered forwards, brains and blood oozed in a sickly mess over his cotton shirt.

There was no cry, no call for help, no moan; nothing but the soft smash that interrupted for a moment the mist-wrapped silence.

My client stood for a second as the body disappeared from view; then, without waiting to hear it strike the water, wheeled slowly and walked quietly back towards the camp.

And that was the last I ever saw of Edward Holt; for of a sudden my sandals put themselves into motion, and I was borne away towards the sun—away from earth, back to my king Diaphernes.